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Citation style: Kyuchukov Hristo, Ushakova Oksana, Yashina Valentina.
(2018). Socio-cultural aspects of language acquisition through conversation.
"Psiholingvìstika" (2018, nr 1, s. 189-201), DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.1217897



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Socio-Cultural Aspects of Language Acquisition Through Conversation

Социально-культурные аспекты овладения языком посредством общения

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Original manuscript received November 12, 2017

Revised manuscript accepted February 22, 2018

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the role of the conversation between parents/caregivers and monolingual children from Russia and bilingual Roma children from Bulgaria. Although the two cultures differ, the parents and adults who communicate with children use the same strategies in order to help them to learn the language from a very early age. In Roma culture, more oral folklore is used, and in Russian culture more children's books and art; these are employed as vessels to introduce the language. In both cultures the conversation and the use of complex sentences is an important factor in language acquisition. The process of language learning is considered in the light of Vygotsky's cultural theory.

The monolingual and bilingual children learn their mother tongue through the communication with parents, community members, siblings, extended family members and teachers. The mothers and fathers, the teachers in kindergartens and preschools, create situations for language learning according to their culture and traditions. The conversation with the young language learners, the stimuli provided by adults, asking complex questions, discussing fairy tales or poems by a famous author are all strategies for communication.

Being an oral culture, Roma culture has its values and they are used in the process of teaching the language to the children. Roma children generally have no books at home in Romani. Russian language and culture, as a written language, has different values and rules. However, in both cultures conversation plays an important role in the learning of the grammar of the mother tongue from an early age.

Key words: *language acquisition, culture, conversation.*

Introduction

Language communication is an act realized by speakers through the social instruments of the language system. Communication is connected with the social and individual interaction between the

participants in this act. The theory of L.S. Vygotsky (1962) about the child's development of the language as a social phenomenon remains fundamental in developmental psycholinguistics. In his theory the social environment and culture play an important role.

In this paper we seek to show what the role of conversation in different settings between parents/caregivers and children is in the process of language acquisition/development.

Literature overview

Ochs Kennen and Klein (1975) provide evidence that the capacity of young children to engage in social interaction exceeds that suggested by Piaget (1926). Rather than being collective monologues, the conversations between the observed twin boys were dialogues: the children attend to one another's utterances and provide relevant responses. This was observed for conversations which were referentially based.

A number of studies have observed how mothers and fathers speak to their children. Berko-Gleason (1975) explored differences between mothers' and fathers' spoken interaction with their children, primarily using data produced by two female and two male daycare teachers at a large university, and by three mothers and three fathers, mostly during family dinners. The study found that:

- mothers use less complex constructions in speaking to their children than fathers do;
- mothers generated lengthier and more complex constructions in speaking to their eldest child than to their younger children;
- fathers issued significantly more commands than did mothers, along with more threats and more teasing by name-calling;
- fathers' language also reflected traditional gender roles in the families (such as in an example in which a father, playing a game with his son, directs the son to the mother when the need for a diaper change arises).

In contrast, both male and female daycare teachers used language that was similar both quantitatively and qualitatively, with both focusing on dialogue based in the present and on the immediate needs of the children. Differences included that the male teachers tended to address the children by name more often than did the female teachers, and that the male teachers issued more imperatives than did the female teachers.

Hummel (1982) reports about a study on verbal interactions of 16 fathers and 16 mothers with their 2-year-olds during their free play. The parent's speech was investigated for syntactic and conversational features. The author did not find differences between fathers and mothers in the use of these features.

Another study by Hladik and Edwards (1984) compared qualitatively and quantitatively the communicative interactions of fathers and mothers with their young child in the naturalistic home environment. The authors investigated ten couples with a similar SES background in three different settings – (a) mother and child, (b) father and child, and (c) mother and father with child communication. The conversations were in the homes and 30-minutes long and they were tape-recorded. Although differences were found as mothers and fathers interacted alone with their child, the similarities outweighed the differences. When both parents were together with their child, there were even fewer differences. The results indicate that both parents can provide very similar programmable input for the child and that the child acquires languages in a rich and highly varied linguistic environment.

Kruper and Użgiris (1987) observed fathers' and mothers' speech to infants during face-to-face interaction in a laboratory setting. Thirty-two father-infant pairs and 40 mother-infant pairs took a part in the study. Infants were divided equally by sex and among two age groups with mean ages of 3 and 9 months. Parental utterances are transcribed from videotapes. The utterances are analyzed in terms of their structure and content. The authors found many similarities in the structure of fathers' and mothers' speech. The speech of both parents is highly repetitive and contained many questions. There are also similarities in the content of fathers' and mothers' speech. Their belief in the infants' ability to think, feel, and act like persons was evident in their speech to the infants. The age of the infant was a significant factor in the analysis of many of the content categories. The sex of the infant and the sex of the parent were also significant factors.

Fraser and Roberts (1975) report findings from a study, in terms of five different measures, of the speech on two standard tasks of 32 middle-class mothers to their children aged 1 1/2; 2 1/2; 4, and 6 years in age. The biological gender and birth order of child were not found to be related to mothers' speech. With increasing age of the child, mothers spoke more, in longer and grammatically more complex utterances,

with greater diversity of vocabulary. The differences in speech addressed to 1 1/2-year-olds and that addressed to 2 1/2-year-olds were particularly marked.

Pellegrini, Brody and Sigel (1985) examine the effects of parental (mother and father) and child (gender and communicative status) status variables on the teaching strategies used by parents in a paper-folding task. The linguistic and nonverbal strategies of 120 parent-child groupings were analyzed during paper-folding tasks. Parents' strategies were coded according cognitive demand and directiveness. Results indicated that strategies varied as a function of children's communicative status. Parents were less directive and more demanding of non-handicapped children compared to handicapped children. Parents strategies seemed to be determined by the children's ability to sustain discourse. The authors discussed the findings in terms of L.S. Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development.

However, there were also studies which were interested only in the speech of mothers in the communication with children. Martlew (1980) observed the discourse features in the language used by mothers and children engaged in dyadic play situations. Differences in the speech patterns of the mothers and children indicated the type of reciprocity engendered by the mothers' social and didactic control strategies. Mothers tended to ensure the maintenance of the conversation and the interchange of the speaker/listener role. The children show a stronger interest in topic in various ways.

Studies with bilingual children also show the influence of the mother's speech on the language development of the children. Demir-Vegter, Aarts and Kurvers (2014) examined lexical richness in maternal input for Turkish preschool children in the Netherlands and the relationship with their vocabulary. Fifteen Turkish mother-child dyads were videotaped at the age of 3 and 4 in three settings: book reading, picture description and block building. Children's vocabulary in Turkish was measured at the age of 3 and 4 and in Dutch at the age of 5; 10. The lexical richness of the input was analyzed both quantitatively (tokens) and qualitatively on diversity, density, and sophistication. The results indicate that lexical richness varied largely among mothers, which could partially be attributed to their SES levels and literacy practices. Furthermore, lexical richness differed between the settings, with the highest richness in the book setting. More importantly, lexical

richness in maternal input related to the vocabulary of children in L1 (Turkish) and in the longer run also to L2 (Dutch). Quality of the input (diversity, density and sophistication) turned out to be more influential than quantity.

The present study

The aim is to show how the caregivers / parents communicate with children using conversation as a tool for language development with monolingual (Russian-speaking) children from Russia and with bilingual (Romani-speaking) children from Bulgaria. The two groups of children have not only cultural differences, but also different social economic status. All this definitely influences the communication between parents and children.

The Russian children usually come from nuclear families with middle socioeconomic status, where the child communicates only with the mother and father. Sometimes there is an older or younger sibling. The children usually attend kindergarten. The observations with the Russian children were done in the kindergarten and the conversation between the teachers and children were observed.

Contrastively, the Roma children grow up in extended families, with low socio-economic status, where the care of the children is a responsibility of everyone. The child is exposed to different registers of communication and they learn from a very early age to communicate with a lot of people.

Our hypotheses is that the family's and society's culture influence the process of the language acquisition and the strategies used by the parents and caregivers in the communication process with the children.

Our understanding about the language development of the children is based on the theoretical ideas of O. Ushakova (2014), where the child is taken with his/her language personality and language abilities; however, this is connected and to some extent depends on the «language world» in which the child grows up.

Bulgarian bilingual children

The Roma children learn the language mainly at home. In most cases the children do not attend kindergarten or preschool but are primarily socialized in the traditional Roma family through the culture.

The care of the children in the Roma families is a responsibility of the extended family. The relatives, neighbors, and older siblings take care of the child, playing with him or her, making jokes and involving the child in the life of the community from a very early age. The children acquire different kind of communicative styles, through which they also learn the ‘mental state’ verbs (Nordquist 2017) in Romani, which show different mental conditions such as happiness, anger, desires, hunger, sleepiness, etc.

A young father playing with his 1; 2-year-old son asks him to show his teeth, newly grown, and at the same time he asks the child to make an angry face. The child understands all kind of questions, although the father does not use the mother’s speech, but he speaks with him with a full grammar and complex sentences.

Ochs (1983) found that in some traditional communities, after the age of 1 the older siblings actually take care of the children, and the communication between the mother and the child goes through the older sibling. For example, the child wants some water from mother, and the mother addresses the older child. This kind of phenomenon is also observed among Roma communities.

Mother: De les pani mi čhaj!

Give him some water, my daughter! (addressing an older child)

Another important issue in communication in Romani is that the children from a very early age are exposed to a quite highly complex language, through Roma culture and tradition. The Roma songs, fairy tales, teasing, jokes are used as a strategy of language development and language socialization. For example, the mother of a 3-month-old boy fits him with milk from a bottle. But the child does not drink the milk. Then the mother starts the following conversation with him:

Mother: Soskenipijesmočo? Why you do not drink my son?

Piljan vodka, akaleskeni pies Did you drink vodka, that you
i thud, a? don’t drink milk?

Kaj piljan vodka? Where did you drink vodka?

Geljankidiskoteka? Did you go to a disco bar?

So kerdan kote mo čho? What did you do there my son?

Keldan e čhajensa? Did you dance with girls?

Arakljan take romni, močo? Did you find yourself a wife?

The child who cannot speak yet reacts to the mother’s discourse with bubbling and a smile. The mother is actually not just speaking but

she is in a way singing all these words to the child, and that transmits a positive emotion to the child as well.

Improvisation of folk songs is another strategy largely used in Roma communities around the world. The following example comes from Greece: a situation where the father of a young boy has to join the army and he must leave his 2-month-old son. The grandmother who takes care of the child is sad that her son has gone off to the army and left his little son at home. She sings a song, a kind of lullaby, which is improvised. She tells a story to her grandson about his father: oh, how great a soldier he is, and how one day when the little boy grows up he too will join the army and become a soldier as his father like his father.

The examples show that the children growing up in traditional Roma communities learn the language from people with different language registers. The parents and the members of the family and close community give them different strategies, which in turn help them to acquire the grammar of Romani. The Roma fathers who are speaking to the children with a complex grammar actually help them to learn the language as a complex system.

Russian monolingual children

The Russian children learn the language in the nuclear family where usually the mother and father are present. In most of the cases the children attend kindergarten or preschool and a child's language development is organized by teachers. The Russian preschools focus on the development of the oral communication of the children. Learning their mother tongue, preschoolers acquire the most important form of verbal communication – oral speech. Language communication in its full form – comprehension and production – should be considered not only in the linguistic sphere (as the child's mastering of language skills, phonetic, grammatical, lexical), but also in the context of the development of children's communication with each other and with adults (acquiring communicative abilities). Therefore, an important task of language education in Russian preschools is not only the formation of a culture of speech, but also a culture of communication and communicative competence and oral literacy.

Language competence, in relation to preschool children, is regarded as an awareness of the phenomena and facts of language and speech, the formation of the ability to use words, their forms and syntactic

structures, in accordance with the norms of the official language, using the synonyms and antonymic resources of the mother tongue.

One of the most important concepts in teaching Russian as a mother tongue is the concept of language ability, without the formation of which one cannot talk about the development of the language personality at the level of preschool age. In linguistics, these concepts are associated with the study of the linguistic 'picture of the world', which is regarded as the use of language tools to reflect the surrounding world. The term linguistic personality (Karaulov, 2010) connects this concept with the language environment (a historically formed association of people on the basis of a common language and culture), that is, with the environment in which the language learning process takes place.

In the Russian preschool educational system, language ability is understood as the ability of a speaker to communicate in his mother tongue. If we associate the concept of language ability with the notion of a tertiary organization of the language system, it is expedient to isolate the corresponding components of language ability (phonetic, grammatical and semantic).

In the Russian kindergarten, the toddler groups have a maximum of 15 children in a group with two teachers (minimum qualification of Bachelor degree) and an assistant teacher. The activities with the children are organized for a time period of 15–20 min. and everything the children do is connected with speaking. The Russian language as a mother tongue is presented to the children in a complex form through different organized forms of activities, like reading books, telling stories, playing, painting, learning songs, etc. The language is acquired through the communication with the teachers and the other children in the group.

The following situation illustrates how the children learn the language via communication with the teacher and with each other:

Teacher: Look, this is a dog (showing a toy)

Ivan: Dog (repeats after the teacher)

Petya: We have a small dog

Teacher: Where is the dog?

Ivan: On the table (points at the toy)

Petya: Our dog is at home. He is small and drinks milk.

Teacher: Yes, the baby dogs drink milk. What else does the dog do?

Petya: He sleeps.

In this situation the teacher is the one who creates conditions where the children can take the initiative to produce language, and the task of the teacher is to observe the use of the language in its complexity. According to Miller (2014: 15), «when children first learn to talk, their speech is entirely social in the sense that it is addressed to others and also because the meanings (referents) that are attached word sounds ('dog') derive from others, such as their caregivers. But after the children learned to speak, they begin to use speech not only to talk to others but to talk aloud to themselves without addressing another person».

The teachers are the ones who provide situations of language creativity which help the children to develop their knowledge in lexicon, morphology, syntax, phonology. The work with different genres from the literature and music, enriches their imagination, give possibilities to children to try complex syntactic structures. The role of the teachers in this situation is very important because they serve as models for how the children to produce the language and they provoke the children to play with the language.

For example, after listening to a poem by S. Esenin, the teacher has many questions regarding the content of the poem, the feelings which the children have, what kind of words the author used, what kind of metaphors, etc. Then the children listen to music and they choose the closest music appealing to their feelings and discuss it.

The children engage in this kind of conversation systematically and this is the way they develop the grammar of their mother tongue.

Conclusion

The monolingual and bilingual children learn their mother tongue through the communication with parents, community members, siblings, extended family members and teachers. The mothers and fathers, the teachers in kindergartens and preschools, create situations for language learning according to their culture and traditions. The conversation with the young language learners, the stimuli provided by adults, asking complex questions, discussing fairy tales or poems by a famous author are all strategies for communication.

Being an oral culture, Roma culture has its values and they are used in the process of teaching the language to the children. Roma children generally have no books at home in Romani. Russian language

and culture, as a written language, has different values and rules. However, in both cultures conversation plays an important role in the learning of the grammar of the mother tongue from an early age.

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АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье основное внимание уделяется рассмотрению общения между родителями / воспитателями и детьми-монолингвами из России и двуязычными цыганскими детьми из Болгарии. Хотя две культуры различаются, родители и взрослые, которые общаются с детьми, используют одни и те же стратегии, чтобы помочь им изучить язык с самого раннего возраста. В цыганской культуре чаще используется устный фольклор, а в русской культуре, наряду с фольклором, для развития речи используются разные виды искусства – художественная литература, музыка, театр. Важным фактором в овладении языком в обеих культурах являются беседы с детьми, выявляющие особенности построения сложных логико-грамматических конструкций. Процесс изучения языка рассматривается в свете культурной теории Л.С. Выготского.

Одноязычные и двуязычные дети учатся родному языку через общение с родителями, членами сообщества, братьями и сестрами, расширенными членами семьи и учителями. Матери и отцы, учителя в детских садах и дошкольных учреждениях создают ситуации для изучения языка в соответствии с их культурой и традициями. Беседа с детьми, стимулы, предоставляемые взрослыми, задающие сложные вопросы, обсуждение сказок или стихов известного автора – все это стратегии общения.

Будучи устной культурой, культура рома имеет свои ценности, и они используются в процессе обучения детей языку. У цыганских детей, как правило, нет книг дома. Русский язык и культура, как письменный язык, имеют разные ценности и правила. Однако в обеих культурах разговор играет важную роль в изучении грамматики родного языка с раннего возраста.

Ключевые слова: дети дошкольного возраста, усвоение языка, культура, беседы.

Ключуков Христо, Ушакова Оксана, Яшина Валентина. Соціально-культурні аспекти оволодіння мовою в процесі спілкування

АНОТАЦІЯ

У статті основну увагу приділено розгляду проблеми спілкування дітей-монолінгвів із Росії, двомовними циганськими дітьми з Болгарії з батьками та вихователями закладів дошкільної освіти. Незважаючи на те, що дві культури – російська й болгарська – відрізняються, батьки й дорослі, які спілкуються з дітьми, використовують одні й ті ж стратегії, щоб допомогти дітям вивчити мову з раннього віку. У циганській культурі найчастіше використовується усний фольклор, а

в російській культурі, поряд із фольклором, з метою розвитку мовлення та навчання мови використовуються різні види мистецтва – художня література, зображувальне мистецтво (репродукції художніх картин – пейзаж, портрет, натюрморт, декоративно-прикладне мистецтво тощо) музика, театр. Важливим фактором в оволодінні мовою в обох культурах є бесіди з дітьми, які дозволяють дорослим виявити особливості побудови дітьми складних логіко-граматичних конструкцій. Процес вивчення мови розглядається в світлі культурної теорії Л.С. Виготського.

Одномовні й двомовні діти навчаються рідної мови через спілкування з батьками, членами спільноти, братами й сестрами. Матері, батьки, педагоги в закладах дошкільної освіти створюють спеціальні мовленнєві ситуації для вивчення мови відповідно до культури й традицій дітей певної національності. Бесіда з дітьми, обговорення казок, оповідань, віршів, переказування, придумування казок, оповідань, загадок – все це стратегії спілкування, які дозволяють дітям оволодівати рідною мовою.

Будучи усною культурою, культура рома має свою систему цінностей, яка використовуються в процесі навчання дітей мови. У циганських дітей, як правило, немає книг вдома. Проте в обох культурах розмова відіграє важливу роль у вивченні граматики рідної мови з раннього віку.

Ключові слова: діти дошкільного віку, засвоєння мови, культура, бесіди.

